

2019

Annual Report

THE UNIVERSITY NETWORK
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



About the University Network for Human Rights

The University Network for Human Rights, housed on the campus of Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, is a nonprofit organization founded in 2018. We are committed to training the next generation in community-centered, interdisciplinary human rights advocacy in the US and globally.

For more information about the University Network, visit:

humanrightsnetwork.org

A Message from

For years, a nagging recognition – and a dream of what we might do about it – lingered in the back of my mind. Along with others, I felt that the human rights movement had drifted from its roots in social justice, becoming less a movement and more an elite, professionalized space dominated by lawyers. Moreover, hand-in-hand with the global rise of ethnonationalism and attacks on core principles of universal human dignity, we have witnessed the inability of human rights practitioners to effectively respond to these challenges. The University Network for Human Rights was borne out of the conviction that we must do better.

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After a dozen years as an activist in Washington DC, on the US-Mexico border, and in Chile and Brazil, I spent nearly two decades directing the human rights clinics at Harvard and Stanford Law Schools. I also had the privilege of teaching undergraduates and other students from non-law backgrounds about human rights advocacy. Thinking about social justice with these students, as it turned out, was remarkably refreshing. Their conception of social change was broader and less constrained than that of my law students. They had not yet unlearned how to think freely or imagine a radically different future.

Working with non-law students forced me to face hard truths about the role of the university in human rights defense and promotion. The lone space for structured, supervised training in human rights advocacy was the law school human rights clinic. By and large, these clinics train future lawyers to bring legal solutions to complex, structural problems. But such problems often require a holistic approach. I felt we should be training students in movement-oriented, multidisciplinary human rights advocacy.

We should be amplifying the voices of communities directly affected by rights abuse and supporting the broader social movements in which their struggles are embedded. Sometimes human rights advocates can best support communities using traditional legal tools. But more often, innovative, non-legal solutions are required. We must be prepared to respond to these needs rather than impose our own agendas.

- **We need to re-anchor human**
- **rights in larger struggles for**
- **social justice.**

As human rights advocates, moreover, we simply aren't getting the job done. The global assault, in recent years, on basic tenets of racial justice, distributive justice, and environmental protection attests to our failures. We need to re-anchor human rights in larger struggles for social justice led by movements of oppressed and marginalized peoples in the US and globally.

our Executive Director

Employing the discourse and practice of human rights as part of a broader movement for transformational change requires us to renew and diversify the human rights space. The role of the university in that project must shift away from the status quo – in which the legal academy is the center of gravity – towards a new model, in which students across disciplines are trained in community-based human rights advocacy. The University Network is developing this model by providing a structured, supervised space within the university for students to engage with social movements and communities facing rights abuse.

- **A broad, interdisciplinary, and**
- **community-based approach**
- **must come to define the role**
- **of the university in human**
- **rights defense and promotion.**

In the last eighteen months, our new venture has had remarkably good fortune. We are immensely grateful to the partners and donors who have invested in our vision, and to university leaders – particularly at Wesleyan, where we are based – for their support.

In these pages, we outline the work we've undertaken alongside communities facing rights abuse, as well as the advances we've made in engaging universities and college students. After our inaugural year, we are even more convinced that a broad, interdisciplinary, and community-based approach must come to define the role of the university in human rights defense and promotion.

The University Network for Human Rights will be at the center of this shift. We thank you for being with us on this journey. We can't wait to share our work with you.

Sincerely,



James Cavallaro
Co-Founder and Executive Director



**UNIVERSITY
NETWORK
FOR HUMAN
RIGHTS**

Answering the Challenge

A New
Approach to
Human Rights
Education and Practice

Our History

The University Network is pioneering a new model in human rights training and practice.

The University Network for Human Rights grew out of an informal collaboration between undergraduate students at Stanford University and its Law School's Human Rights Clinic, which was directed by James Cavallaro until 2019. Although undergraduate curricula generally include a range of courses, certificates, internships, and even majors in human rights, there are virtually no supervised, structured opportunities for college students to engage critically in the practice of human rights.

Over the course of three academic years, undergrads participated in the training sessions of Stanford Law School's Human Rights Clinic. In 2017, the Human Rights Clinic began incorporating undergraduates in its work on a volunteer basis – mostly through supervised desktop research.

In early 2018, the Clinic developed a field research program as part of a larger project challenging environmental racism by multinational corporations in Louisiana's Cancer Alley. In response to a call for participation, the Clinic received an outpouring of interest from undergraduates seeking to spend their spring break working on the project.

The Clinic ultimately selected fourteen students, provided them with specialized training, and then supervised their implementation of a household health survey over ten days in March 2018. Twelve more undergraduates volunteered over the subsequent year to work on several projects in partnership with law students, the clinic instructors, and a range of grassroots organizations and community advocates.

As the year came to a close, James Cavallaro and Ruhan Nagra brought these efforts together to launch the University Network for Human Rights. The University Network is the formalization of an organic process that began at Stanford – a process driven by and designed for students often excluded from practical training in human rights advocacy.

Today, the University Network facilitates supervised, interdisciplinary engagement in human rights practice at universities across the country and beyond. University Network supervisors train undergraduate and graduate students in human rights fact-finding, documentation, and advocacy that centers communities directly affected by rights abuse.

Our Mission

Training advocates. Uplifting movements. Empowering communities.

We are committed to defending and promoting human rights in their broadest sense. We support people's movements at home and abroad, following the lead of communities directly affected by rights abuse. We practice an interdisciplinary approach to human rights advocacy, frequently incorporating insights from multiple disciplines and traditions.

We train, supervise, and mentor the next generation of human rights defenders by engaging undergraduate and graduate students in our human rights practice. The University Network is especially committed to recruiting and training students of color, LGBTQI and gender non-conforming students, first-generation and low-income students, and students with disabilities.

We are community-first advocates. We partner with advocacy organizations and communities threatened by abusive state, corporate, or private conduct. We affirm that individuals, groups, and communities affected by actual or threatened rights abuse must be at the center of any and all advocacy efforts. The role of those not directly affected is necessarily derivative and subsidiary.



Ruhan Nagra (L) and James Cavallaro (R) confer with Adivasi (indigenous tribal) community members in India fighting a major dam development project that threatens their land and livelihoods.
© Krishand Rk 2018 / University Network for Human Rights

Our Year in Review

Training Students



Our Pilot Program

In the 2019-2020 academic year, we partnered with Wesleyan University to launch a year-long, undergraduate training pilot program. Our program engaged students from diverse backgrounds through classroom instruction, practical training modules, and real-world human rights advocacy projects.

In the first leg of our program, James Cavallaro taught nearly twenty undergraduates in an intensive semester-long seminar. This course critically assessed the human rights movement, challenging students' perceptions about civil and human rights and interrogating the role of the United States in the human rights movement. Students were also introduced to basic methods in human rights practice – including fact-finding, documentation, and advocacy – and their limitations.

Students ended their semester by contributing to some of the University Network's real-world advocacy projects. These projects included, for example, research for experts on the UN Subcommittee for the Prevention of Torture and an investigation of human rights violations in factory farming and the "Big Ag" industry.



Wesleyan undergraduate Mahey Gheis presents the results of her research on US military involvement in the MENA region.



Students in the University Network/Wesleyan pilot program engage in a strategy workshop.

WHAT OUR STUDENTS ARE SAYING

"Our final fact-finding projects were invaluable in practicing real-world skills with real stakes beyond our individual grades."

– Anonymous course review, Wesleyan University

"This was a phenomenal course. I loved being able to work directly with the University Network and the UN [Subcommittee for the Prevention of Torture ...]"

– Anonymous course review, Wesleyan University

"This experience was so powerful precisely because it removed me from my [college] bubble. I've always been interested in human rights, but [the pilot program] helped me confront the realities of this work. This was one of the most unique experiences I've ever had."

– Sanya Bery, Wesleyan Undergraduate and Pilot Program Participant

“

Learning from and working alongside directly-affected community members was a **completely transformative experience.**”

– Justin Ratkovic
Wesleyan Undergraduate and
Pilot Program Participant



Participants compare interview notes during our human rights fact-finding simulation in December 2019.

Fact-Finding Simulation

The second phase of the University Network/Wesleyan pilot program was an immersive, week-long simulation exercise in partnership with the Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico. This simulation is a hands-on pedagogical tool designed to train students in human rights fact-finding, documentation, and advocacy.

While students played the roles of human rights researchers, fifty-eight actors trained by the University Network played the roles of villagers, rebels, police, government officials, activists, witnesses, and technical experts. Students were tasked with gathering information about a fictitious human rights crisis through interviews with actors and other fact-finding methods. Additionally, students participated in mock media and advocacy exercises through simulated interviews with actors playing the roles of TV anchors, radio broadcasters, and members of international bodies.

Following the simulation, students received thorough feedback on their performance.

Real-World Engagement

In January 2020, students in the pilot program joined University Network researchers in Louisiana to engage in real-world fact-finding for a developing advocacy campaign. Prior to the trip, students underwent additional training, building on the skills they developed during the simulation exercise.

Under the supervision of seasoned human rights advocates, students interviewed community members facing environmental racism and corporate abuse. After interviews, University Network staff led students in debriefing sessions, allowing them to reflect on the ethics of working with affected communities as outside advocates.



Students meet with Lt. Gen (ret.) Russel L. Honoré to learn more about environmental advocacy in Louisiana.

During the eleven-day trip, students also met with local advocates and activists, including Lt. Gen. (ret.) Russel Honoré (see left), a renowned Louisiana-based environmentalist. Through these meetings, students gained a deeper understanding of Louisiana's decades-long history of environmental injustice, grassroots efforts led by affected communities, and effective advocacy strategies moving forward.

During the Spring 2020 semester, students will continue to work closely with University Network supervisors on this ongoing advocacy project through an Advanced Human Rights Advocacy Seminar at Wesleyan. Student contributions to the project will include public records research, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) development, ongoing fact-finding, and eventual publication of a report and other advocacy outputs.



Tara Nair (R), a program participant, interviews community member Larry Allison (L) in Louisiana.



Program participant Mahey Gheis (L) joins Ruhan Nagra (R) to interview community member Carolyn Peters (L) in Louisiana.



Program participants meet with Janice Areno (R), resident of Bayou d'Inde.



Harold Areno (R), a resident of Louisiana's contaminated Bayou d'Inde, surveys the environmental degradation of his property with James Cavallaro (L).

Summer Intensive

Practical training in human rights advocacy in a rigorous and collegial setting.

During the summer of 2020, the University Network for Human Rights will host its inaugural Summer Human Rights Intensive. In this eight-week program, undergraduates from across the country will receive unparalleled training in human rights theory and practice. Seasoned human rights advocates, including former UN special rapporteurs Maina Kiai and Leilani Farha, will teach practical modules on diverse topics such as climate justice, coalition-building, and digital evidence. After the summer, students will continue working with University Network supervisors on real-world human rights advocacy projects during the 2020-2021 academic year.

The University Network received over 170 applications for the 2020 Summer Human Rights Intensive. Applicants represented over fifty universities across the country, reflecting the clear demand from students for opportunities to engage meaningfully in human rights work.



Two students interview a "rebel group" during our simulation exercise in December 2019.

Our Year in Review

Empowering Communities



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Day of Judgment

Exposing the U.S. role in unlawful Saudi and UAE-led airstrikes on civilians in Yemen

The University Network partnered with Yemeni human rights organization Mwatana on a groundbreaking new report, *Day of Judgment*, detailing the role of U.S. and European weapons in Saudi/UAE-led coalition attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure in Yemen. Mwatana researchers documented twenty-seven coalition attacks on Yemeni civilian gatherings, homes, vehicles, public facilities, businesses, and a cultural center. The attacks killed at least 203 people and injured at least 749. At a minimum, 122 children were among the dead and wounded.

University Network students and staff reviewed the documentation for each attack—including expert analyses of weapons remnants recovered at the scenes of strikes—and applied international and domestic legal standards. We found that, of the twenty-seven attacks documented by Mwatana, the Saudi/UAE-led Coalition used US-made weapons in at least twenty-five cases and UK-made weapons in at least five.

In March 2019, the University Network, Mwatana, and Dutch peace organization PAX released our findings. *Day of Judgment* was covered by The Washington Post, Newsweek, Democracy Now!, The Independent (UK), and Al Jazeera, among other outlets. The report directly contributed to recent debates in Congress regarding the War Powers Act.



Mwatana researchers and University Network students and staff linked US-made munitions, such as those seen above, to unlawful Saudi/UAE-led airstrikes in Yemen that killed at least 203 people.

© 2019 / Mwatana for Human Rights

Waiting for the Flood

Defending indigenous land rights in India

In September 2019, thousands of families in the submergence zone of India's Sardar Sarovar Dam faced imminent inundation from rapidly rising waters. The University Network released a new report and video documenting the human rights impacts of the dam project on Adivasi (indigenous tribal) communities along the Narmada River. *Waiting for the Flood* was based on the University Network's first-hand field research and documentation, conducted in partnership with Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). NBA is an Indian social movement of Adivasis, farmers, environmentalists, and human rights activists who have mobilized for decades against large-scale dam development projects along the Narmada River.

The University Network released *Waiting for the Flood* at a press conference in Bhopal, India in September 2019. The report was covered in Hindi- and English-language media.



University Network researchers walk to meet Adivasi community members.
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Waiting to Die

Fighting environmental racism and corporate abuse in Louisiana's Cancer Alley

Since its inception, the University Network has partnered closely with the Concerned Citizens of St. John Parish, a community group fighting chloroprene emissions from the Denka Performance Elastomer neoprene facility in Louisiana. The Denka plant is located in “Cancer Alley” – the 85-mile stretch along the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge dotted with more than 150 chemical plants and oil refineries. Most communities in Cancer Alley are predominantly Black. Many residents attribute staggering levels of cancer and other illness to toxic air emissions from industry.

The University Network designed and implemented an unprecedented survey-based study of the health effects of the Denka plant on residents in the surrounding area. The study, released in our July 2019 report, *Waiting to Die*, found that cancer and illness levels among residents surveyed are unusually high and correlated with proximity to the Denka plant. In response to these disturbing findings, the Governor of Louisiana commissioned a state project to count cancer diagnoses in the area around the Denka plant. Additionally, the St. John Parish school board announced that it would consider moving children out of Fifth Ward Elementary School, which sits less than a third of a mile away from the plant. The University Network study was also formally submitted to the EPA.



As part of our broader advocacy strategy to compel Denka – a Japanese corporation – to reduce its emissions to EPA-recommended levels, we traveled to Tokyo in June and September 2019 with two members of the Concerned Citizens of St. John Parish, Robert Taylor and Lydia Gerard. In June, the Concerned Citizens and University Network confronted Denka officials and protested outside the company’s annual shareholder meeting, met privately with several Japanese shareholders of Denka, and held a press conference at the Ministry of the Environment.

In September, after the U.S. release of *Waiting to Die*, we returned to Tokyo with Mr. Taylor and Ms. Gerard to release our report at a press conference at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club. Accompanied by international media, we attempted to confront Denka officials at their headquarters. Our team also met with the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, the export credit agency that financed Denka’s purchase of the Louisiana plant.



Top: Robert Taylor (C), Lydia Gerard (R), and Ruhana Nagra (L) speak at a press conference at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club in Tokyo regarding the findings of the University Network report, *Waiting to Die*. Taylor, Gerard, and Nagra also attempted to confront Denka officials at their headquarters.

© 2019 Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan



Bottom: Robert Taylor (L) and Mary Hampton (R), members of Concerned Citizens of St. John Parish, after meeting with the EPA in November 2019. Taylor and Hampton were joined by the University Network, Earthjustice, and the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights.

© 2019 Matt Roth / Earthjustice

Opposite Page: Members of the Concerned Citizens of St. John Parish appear with University Network students who implemented an unprecedented household health survey of the area surrounding the Denka plant.

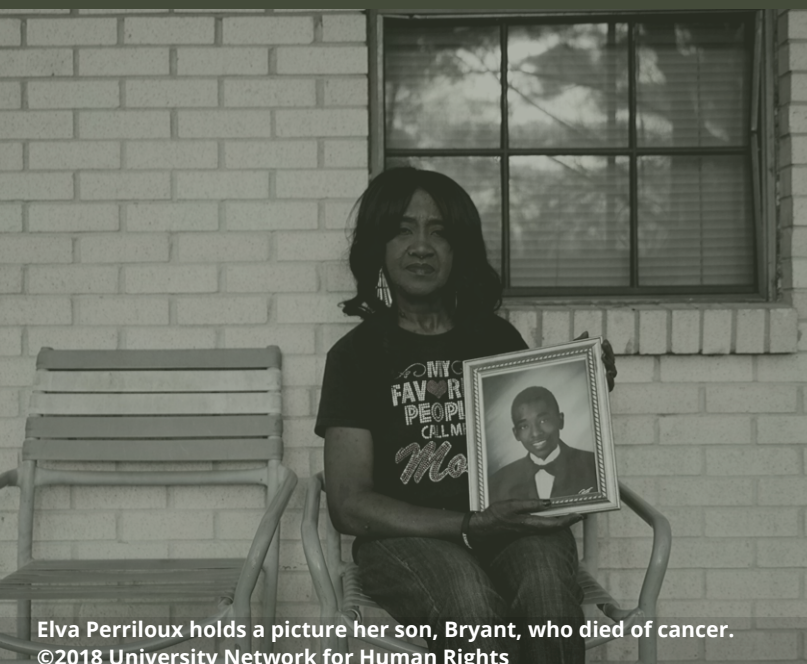
© 2019 Julie Dermansky

Waiting to Die

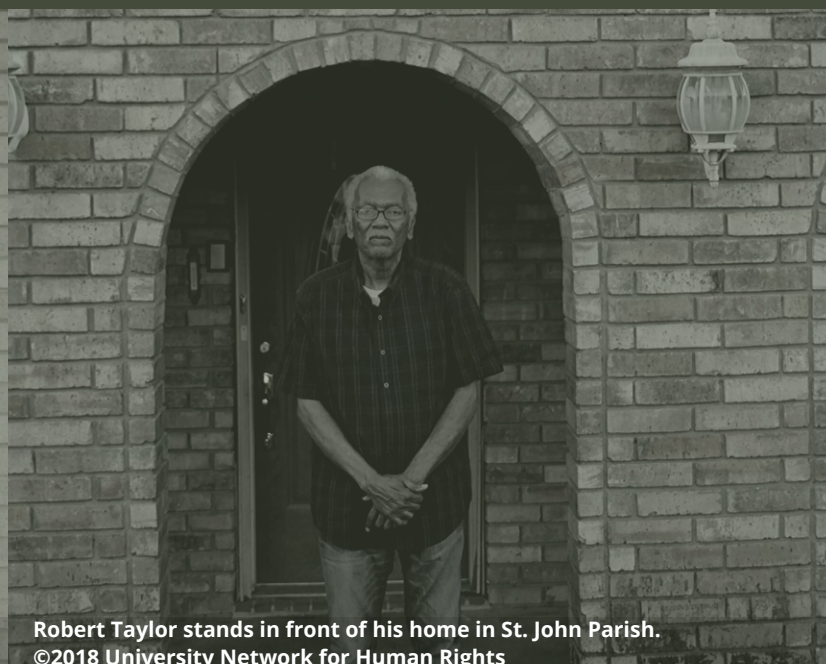
Further steps. Continued momentum.

Our ongoing partnership with the Concerned Citizens has also included advocacy vis-à-vis EPA officials, with whom the University Network and Concerned Citizens met in November 2019 in Washington DC; ongoing outreach to North American and European shareholders of Denka; community empowerment activities, including a Cancer Alley Community Empowerment Workshop to provide local residents and activists with the tools and talking points to fight industry propaganda; and video advocacy through short films that highlight over twenty community members' stories, in their own words.

Our work to fight environmental racism in Louisiana has received extensive local, national, and international attention. We presented the findings of our health study on a panel featuring Reverend William Barber and co-hosted by The Guardian and the Poor People's Campaign. Our health study and advocacy in Japan were covered in the CBS Evening News, The Guardian, NowThis News, Colorlines, Axios, Kyodo News (Japan AP), and Mainichi Shimbun (one of Japan's four major daily newspapers), among other outlets.



Elva Perriloux holds a picture her son, Bryant, who died of cancer.
©2018 University Network for Human Rights



Robert Taylor stands in front of his home in St. John Parish.
©2018 University Network for Human Rights

“

We've learned a lot from [the University Network], and you've learned a lot from us. It really has helped the cause. **We've gone as far as we have because of you.**”

– Mary Hampton

President of the Concerned
Citizens of St. John Parish

UNHR in the News

In 2019, our work appeared in major US news outlets, such as The Washington Post, CBS News, Democracy Now, NewsWeek, Axios, Colorlines, and NowThis News. The University Network also received global attention in The Guardian (UK); The Independent (UK); O Liberal (Brazil); Deutsche Welle (Germany); Al Jazeera (Qatar); Naidunia (India); The Hitavada (India); Kyodo News (Japan); and the Mainichi Shimbun (Japan).

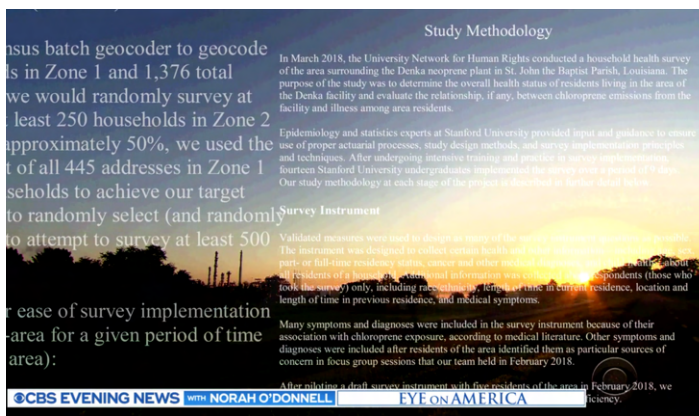


WORLD

AMERICAN BOMBS HAVE KILLED HUNDREDS OF CIVILIANS, INCLUDING CHILDREN, IN UNLAWFUL STRIKES ON YEMEN: REPORT



Japanese owners of plant at heart of US Cancer Town refuse to meet activists



Middle East

American and British bombs killed more than 200 Yemeni civilians, report says

Educational Partners

The University Network for Human Rights is proud to collaborate with the following partner institutions to bring practical experience in human rights education to students across the globe.

Pilot Program

Wesleyan University has committed to continuing our pilot program in human rights training in the 2020-2021 academic year.

Next year, we also expect to launch similar programs at the **University of Connecticut** and **Trinity College**.

Clinical Development

The University Network for Human Rights is collaborating with two flagship Brazilian universities, the **Universidade Católica de Pernambuco** and the **Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos**, to develop clinical education in human rights for students in Brazil.

Supporting Graduate Students

In 2020, the University Network joined the **Connecticut Baden-Württemberg Human Rights Consortium**. This group serves as an "incubator for diverse and interdisciplinary human rights projects" for graduate students in the United States and abroad.

Our Advisory Committee

Philip Alston

John Norton Pomeroy Professor of Law,
NYU School of Law

Luis Arriaga

President, ITESO University,
Guadalajara, Mexico

Jamil Dakwar

Director, ACLU Human Rights Program

Bernard Duhaime

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UN Special Rapporteur on the Right
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